

Do You Ever Feel Like God Is Fighting Against You?

Franklin Church of Christ
Edwin Crozier
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AM Worship

Introduction:

We sing some awesome songs. They are songs intended to provide comfort, nurturing and spiritual growth. They remind us of God's power, love and concern. However, let's be shockingly honest. Do some of us ever leave the assembly thinking those songs are wonderful platitudes that are fine for "church," but they don't work in real life? Are there ever times when you come into the assembly, dressed neatly, smiling brightly, putting on the "everything is fine" face, mouthing the words of these songs but not really singing them because deep down inside you don't really feel them? It is all well and good to sing "Jesus...is a shelter in the time of storm," but how strongly do we believe that when we see our homes ravaged by hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, tornadoes or fires? How easy is it to sing "Precious Memories," when they are filled with abusive parents, destructive relationships and pain? Can we sing "Safe in the Arms of Jesus," when our husband lies comatose in the hospital because of a car wreck? What about singing "O Thou Fount of Every Blessing" as we leave the hospital after our first, second or third miscarriage? How easily do we sing "It Pays to Love Jesus" when we know that tomorrow we are going to send off our 50th resume because we have already received our 49th rejection? How about "Without Him I would be nothing," when with Him I still feel like nothing? Sometimes singing "Happiness is the Lord" seems a little empty when we are leaving the assembly to go to the hospital to our terminally ill parents, spouses or children. Can we sing "Peace, Perfect Peace" when we have been the victim of abuse, robbery or rape? How hard is it to sing "Clay in the Potter's Hand" when we have prayed and prayed for God to give us strength to overcome some sin but it just seems He has abandoned us to a dreadful cycle of guilt and sin? Isn't it hard to sing "I Walk With the King," when at times it seems like the King is fighting to get us to quit walking with Him? In fact, aren't there times when we look at life and decide we don't want to stand on the promises, lean on the everlasting arms or have closer walk with Him anymore? We wonder why His grace is not reaching us, we want to flee and hide somewhere safe from His searching gaze? Some of us have never felt this way. But many have. Job, perhaps, would understand this feeling. Sadly, at these times many resolve no longer to linger in Christ, instead they become charmed by the world's delights and go headlong back into sin taking refuge in alcohol, drugs, pornography, sexual immorality, the pursuit of wealth, etc. For all of the platitudes we might offer, in a moment of honesty, many of us recognize that the deep spiritual truths of these songs do not always mirror the way we feel on a gut level about how the world really works. I wish I could tell you there is some quick and easy formula to make those songs describe your life. I can't. However, I can share a Bible story with you. It is not a Bible story that will just make all these feelings vanish. It is, however, a story that illustrates exactly how many of us feel. As we pursue God's promised blessings, we sometimes think it ought to be easy, after all God is all-loving and all-good. Yet, at times, it feels like He is the very one fighting against us. It is Jacob's story in **Genesis 32:24-32**, but first listen to his background story. As you do, don't just hear the story, think about how the modern, typical American would respond and feel during this kind of life.

Discussion:

- I. Jacob's story.
 - A. While in the womb, Jacob and his brother seemingly struggled with each other. God informed Rebekah that Jacob, though younger, would be the greater. What can we expect from a life with such a promise? When Jacob was born in **Genesis 25:26**, he came out of the womb holding his twin's heel. He was named "supplanter" or "one who grabs by the heel." I imagine Rebekah, who favored Jacob, told him of God's promise. But, how could this happen? He would not receive the greater birthright or blessing of the firstborn. He would not be the chief of his family when his father died. He was the younger.
 - B. He took advantage of his older brother's hunger to gain the birthright (**Genesis 25:29-34**). He took advantage of his father's failed eyesight to gain the blessing (**Genesis 27**). Esau threatened to kill Jacob as soon as Isaac died. Jacob was forced to flee, leaving home and family. On his way, God met him at Luz and promised to be with Jacob in his flight and bring him back home one day. He also promised to make Jacob a great nation and give him the land on which he was sleeping (**Genesis 28**). Surely this man will have a charmed life. Or is he?

- C. In **Genesis 29**, he met the girl he wanted to marry, Rachel (his cousin). He struck a deal with her father (his uncle) and agreed to marry her after seven years of working. The wonderful night came and Laban tricked Jacob. He gave Rachel's sister, Leah, instead. To have Rachel as his wife, he had to work another seven years. Fourteen years of labor to marry the woman he loved. We often just read through this story because we know it so well. But think about that. The text doesn't tell us what Jacob thought regarding God's promise at this time, but do you think his faith might have been shaken somewhat? Would ours have been? How could the God of promise let this happen? Then Jacob had to deal with the competition between his wives. Again, I am not sure we think about this. If we think we have trouble in our families, imagine what it must be like to be married to two competing, arguing sisters. Then after completing his 14 years of work for his wives, he wanted to leave (**Genesis 30:25-27**). Laban convinced him to stay and work for him. Throughout this time Jacob began to prosper. Once again, I think we read through this story and don't realize what was actually happening. It looks to us like Jacob had a one way ticket to wealth. But that is not what happened. Every time Jacob started to get ahead, Laban changed the wages (**Genesis 31:7**). That would be like your boss saying, "I am going to pay you hourly." When the hours start mounting up, he says, "Actually it is going to be salary," and now you are behind again. Then when he ought to give you a good paycheck he says, "Nope, commission." When you are getting ahead there he says, "Actually, I think stock options are going to be the way to go." Then when the stock starts going up, he says, "Actually, I am just going to promise you a portion of the company if I ever sell it." Every time you start accumulating and making good based on your pay scale, he changes it and knocks you back five steps. We read this and see the end result that God was with him and helped him prosper in the long run, but how do you think Jacob felt every time the game changed? Do you think he ever questioned whether God was actually with him? After all, if God was with him, would Laban constantly cheat and swindle him? How would you feel if you were getting ahead and the rug was swept out from under you for the tenth time?
- D. Then God called and said it is time to go back home (**Genesis 31:3**). He sneaks out with his wives. But Laban chased him down. It looked like a showdown, but Laban backed off because of a vision from God. Jacob continued on from one near fight to another. As he got closer to home he sent messengers to his brother. How would Esau feel? When the messengers got back they explained Esau was on his way with 400 men (**Genesis 32:6**). Remember, God promised to be with Jacob. But here comes Esau, the brother who had promised to kill Jacob for his treachery. He is coming with 400 men. If I were Jacob, I would not have thought Esau just wanted to introduce me to his 400 best friends. How would you have felt about God's promises in this situation? Jacob did all he knew to do. He came up with a strategy to save at least part of his family and goods, dividing them in two. Then he prayed and what a prayer (**Genesis 32:9-12**). He cast himself on God's mercy. How he had grown. No longer making deals with God, didn't deserve anything, "But God, please bless me, delivering me as you promised to do."
- E. The next day he sent three sets of gifts of goats, sheep, camels, cows and donkeys. He sent his wives and children across the ford of the river, essentially the entrance to his homeland and the reception of God's promises. But before he went across the river himself, he was alone. Perhaps praying some more, we don't know. Yet, then came the apparent answer to his earlier prayer. A messenger from God met him before he crossed the Jabbok (**Genesis 32:24-32**). Did the messenger part the waters of the Jabbok and allow Jacob through on dry land? Did it minister to him providing strength? Did it comfort him telling him all was well and not to fear? No. The messenger of God began fighting with him. It was almost as though the God who promised to bring Jacob back into the land of Promise was now presenting himself as the last obstacle to actually getting into it. Before Jacob could enter he had to wrestle with the messenger of God (or, as some suggest the visible representation of God Himself). Just let that sink in. There is a reason this passage causes us so many difficulties. It is because what we read here just sounds so odd to us. God fighting against the servant to whom He made so many great promises. But stop for a moment. Isn't this a visible manifestation of exactly how we feel some times? We sing "The Blessed Life" and talk about "Standing on the Promises" but don't some of us feel like the very God who promised these blessings is the one fighting against us getting to them, as He allows us to face marital strife, career obstacles, congregational problems, spiritual roadblocks, etc.

Shouldn't the God who has promised all these things make it a little easier, but instead it is almost like He is letting us face things that will throw us off the track. Before we try to make sense of this scene between Jacob and God's messenger, can't we just allow the imagery to wash over us and see that this picture looks just how so many of us feel sometimes? I know there are some here who are extremely strong spiritually. You may not have ever had these feelings. You may not grasp this and are even considering going to the elders to have them question my soundness for even bringing this concept up, but talk to your brethren and see if they don't agree that this picture accurately represents how they feel sometimes.

F. But then see what happens. Instead of being stopped by the messenger of God. Instead of breaking free from the struggle and fleeing back to Paddan-aram, Jacob hung in there. He endured the struggle. The messenger of God wounded Jacob physically. How shocking is that? The God who promised to bless Jacob and see him safely into the land of promise wounded him. Yet Jacob still wouldn't stop. He continued holding on to the messenger demanding the blessing and then he received it. "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed." According to **Hosea 12:3-4**, this wrestling match was not a representation of Jacob fighting against God's desire to bless him. It was a wrestling match to get the blessing. The fight was one in which Jacob wept and sought the favor of God. God had promised Jacob a blessing and even when God Himself became the opponent, the last obstacle between Jacob and the blessing, he would not let go. The messenger refused to tell Israel his name. Israel crossed the Jabbok, met his friendly brother and went on to be the father of the nation of Israel. The 12 tribes came from his 12 sons. Jacob received the blessing of God but look at what he went through to get it.

II. When you feel like God is fighting you: lessons from **Genesis 32:24-32**.

- A. *Obtaining God's promises is not always easy.* We have the idea that since God is all-powerful and all-good, He is going to make our lives as Christians all-easy. That is not so. Life is a struggle. It is a struggle for us. Consider passages like **Acts 14:22**. We enter the promised kingdom through tribulations, not through a rose garden. We must not be surprised at this.
- B. *Sometimes it will feel like God is our opponent.* When this wrestling match ended, Jacob said, "I have seen God face to face..." (**Genesis 32:30**). Jacob saw God as the opponent. We are not less spiritual than others when we feel that way. Read **Psalms 88**. Heman saw God as his opponent. God put him in the pit. God removed his acquaintances. God hid His face from him.
- C. *Sometimes we get injured on the way to the blessing.* I am still amazed about the limp Jacob had for the rest of his life from the time he prepared to receive God's blessing. Am I the only one, however, who thought "thorn in the flesh" at this point? Paul received an injury on the way to getting God's blessing (**II Corinthians 12:7-10**) and God refused to remove it.
- D. *God will let our struggle be more than we want to deal with, but will not let it be more than we can deal with.* One of the interesting things about this story is the statement that the messenger did not prevail against Jacob, he crippled Jacob. Someone who could just touch the socket of the thigh and dislocate it could just as easily touch the neck and dislocate it. The messenger was not in an all out fight to overcome Jacob. If he had been, he would have easily tossed Jacob aside. He wanted to do enough to test Jacob to see if he would give up on the blessing, but not so much that Jacob could not possibly attain the blessing. In other words, God will let us face enough stress, strife, trial, trauma and temptation in this life to test our resolve. He will, however, never let us be tempted beyond what we are able (**I Corinthians 10:13**).
- E. *God will not give us every blessing we ask for or every blessing He gives others.* Even when Jacob finally received the blessing, the messenger of God would not do everything Jacob asked. The messenger would not reveal His name. Moses was given this kind of blessing (**Exodus 6:3**), but Jacob was not. He had to come to grips with that. So do we. Like Peter who wanted to know about John in **John 21:21-22**, we have to learn to accept God's blessings to us and not get caught up in how He didn't bless us or how He blesses others.
- F. *Finally, God will bless us, but we have to hang on to Him.* If there is one important lesson in Jacob's wrestling match with the messenger of God it is this one. God wants to bless us. But He is not in the business of just handing out candy to His children. He is only willing to bless us when we demonstrate that we so want His blessing we will hang on to Him for dear life no mat-

ter what He allows or throws our way. We often have an “if only” mindset. “God, if only you will bless me, I will serve you.” “God, if only you will let me cross this river, I will obey you.” “God, if only you will fix my injured hip socket, I will honor you.” That was not the attitude of the biblical saints. They had an “even though” mentality. I am not sure it can be said more clearly and concisely than by Job in **Job 13:15**, “Though He slay me, I will hope in Him.” Are we willing to hang on to God, hoping in Him, trusting in His promises even though He slays us? That was Job’s faith. That was Jacob’s faith.

Conclusion:

Those songs we started with do not always mirror how we feel on a gut level. But they do describe the truth. God is with us. God will bless us. He will grant us grace and entrance to heaven. But, frankly, He is asking us, “How badly do you want it?” We are in a wonderful sanctuary right now. We are gathered in the presence of God, worshiping and serving Him, communing with like-minded brethren. But tomorrow we are going back out into the world. I can’t make any great promises about tomorrow except that it is the world. We cannot expect it to be heaven. However, heaven awaits us if we will only hang on to God’s hand for all it’s worth.